

# Pope and the Epic

## Penelope Wilson

It may seem odd that an age as classically-minded as the eighteenth century produced no great epic poem of its own to set alongside the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid* (or indeed *Paradise Lost*). It was taken for granted in literary theory that the epic was the greatest of all poetic forms, and *awareness* of it – especially of the *Aeneid*, since Greek was a minority interest even then – is everywhere in eighteenth century literature. But its most characteristic appearance is in the form of parody or mock-epic – as in Henry Fielding's novels (he described *Joseph Andrews* as 'a comic epic in prose') or in a 'heroi-comical' poem like Pope's *Rape of the Lock*. In their own writings, in fact, authors of the period tend to treat the epic with a jokiness or irony which suggests embarrassment as much as admiration.

Does this mean that Pope and his contemporaries were only paying lip-service to Homer and Virgil – or that there was such a strong sense of general inferiority that the only possibility left for 'the heroic' was as a means of ridicule? The case of Pope himself is an especially interesting one. Never unduly modest, he knew that he was the greatest poet of his age – and he might well have been expected to see himself in the top role, i.e. that of epic poet. In fact, as we shall see, he did have his eyes on that role – but his failure ever to fill it perhaps tells us even more than his ambition about the various kind of importance the Greek and Latin classics can have for later writers.

### 'Nurs'd up in Homer and Virgil'

Pope was never a classical 'scholar' – in fact, like many lesser mortals, he thought the *minutiae* of professional classical scholarship tedious and anti-literary. (One of his *betes noires* was the great Richard Bentley, editor of Horace and discoverer of the Homeric digamma.) Pope's interest in classical literature was that of a devoted amateur, despite the fact that he spent the best part of twelve years translating Homer. He had such an irregular education that, as Dr. Johnson commented, 'it was not likely that he overflowed with Greek'. But epic poetry was one of his first loves. At eight years old he was rapturously enjoying the *Iliad* in John Ogilby's verse translation, in a huge illustrated folio edition. A precocious writer as well as reader, at about twelve he wrote a play based on the *Iliad*, and persuaded his schoolfellows (and the master's gardener, who played Ajax) to act it in costumes designed after the very theatrical pictures in Ogilby. By the time he was fifteen he had written four books of an epic of his own, *Alcander, Prince of Rhodes* – apparently something of a mish-mash of schoolboy reading, but he kept it by him for fifteen years before following a friend's advice and setting fire to it.

Pope in old age described himself as 'nurs'd up in Homer and Virgil'; and Homer later became a nurse in a practical as well as intellectual sense. It may seem strange to us, but in the eighteenth century translation from the classics was a sure money-spinner, and Pope's

English version of Homer (who became a best-seller again for Penguin in this century) made enough money to keep him comfortably to the end of his life. The task was a daunting one, and for years it gave Pope bad dreams of journeys without end, but he never lost the enthusiastic *rapprochement* with Homer which had been formed so early. Towards the end of his life, he remarked that he 'always was particularly struck with that passage in Homer where he makes Priam's grief for the loss of Hector break out into anger against his attendants and sons (*Iliad* 24.237-65), and could never read it without weeping for the distress of that unfortunate old prince' – and a witness reports: 'He read it then, and was interrupted by his tears'.

### **Dire offence from am'rous causes**

As this anecdote suggests. Pope had the kind of historical sense defined by T. S. Eliot in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* as 'a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal'. He read Homer (firmly believing, of course, that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were written by one man, a man with 'the greatest Invention of any Writer whatever') as a contemporary – or in his own words 'as a Poet' – rather than as an ancient Greek text in need of learned elucidation.

The same sense of immediacy in relation to the epic comes across in his first mock-epic poem, *The Rape of the Lock* (written just as he was starting on the translation of the *Iliad*). The poem was meant to 'laugh together' two well-to-do families who had fallen badly out over the stealing of a lock of a young lady's hair; and Pope set out to defuse the situation by placing the 'rape' itself and the pastimes of the leisured class on an afternoon outing to Hampton Court against a magnified backdrop of heroic and religious values which should restore them all to a sense of proportion.

It is a fascinating poem on many levels, but one of its chief fascinations in this context lies in the hint that the heroic backdrop itself can be seen as, ultimately, a trick of the light.

*What dire offence from am'rous causes springs,  
What mighty contests rise from trivial things.  
I sing...*

The grandiosity seems at first distinctly tongue-in-cheek, with the pretensions of the eighteenth-century *beau monde* to heroic stature instantly sent up by the deadpan bathos of the adjectives 'am'rous' and 'trivial'. But even the most rudimentary knowledge of classical epic makes us think again – for what causes, if not amorous, could be said to bring about the heroic engagements of the *Iliad*? In the background we have the abduction/seduction of Helen; in the foreground there is Agamemnon's appropriation of Briseis as the immediate cause of Achilles' taking such 'dire offence'. (One can also think of instances, even if less central, in the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* – Penelope's suitors, Circe, Dido.) In the second line, we should bear in mind the less pejorative sense of 'trivial' as 'common' or 'everyday'; and the opening couplet becomes as much a general comment on the 'heroising' or myth-making tendency of the human mind as a jibe at the warring families. Often in the poem a touch of

satire rubs off on the heroes themselves – putting us in mind, perhaps, in modern terms, of the shabby actuality which we now know to have lain behind such classic Western exploits as *The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*?

### **The Great Yawn of Dullness**

By the time of Pope's second mock-epic, *The Dunciad*, the tone of delicate and sympathetic scepticism has given place to an overwhelming pessimism. In the twentieth century we have become familiar with various forms of a genre which we might call 'cultural lamentation' – in which the main thrust of the argument is that the old values and standards are disintegrating under the pressure of popular and ephemeral trash. *The Dunciad* is probably the most effective of these ever written. It bristles with forgotten names which make it difficult to enjoy today, but it is not difficult to feel the strength of the fear behind Pope's final vision of cultural apocalypse – the Great Yawn of Dullness, a kind of chemical warfare against high culture, spreading its contagion in ever-expanding ripples over the civilised world.

This time Pope uses his knowledge of epic in a quite different way, leaving behind his youthful passion for the exploits of the Greeks and Trojans. In *The Dunciad* he makes a much more concentrated use of the central action of Virgil's *Aeneid*, turning the poem into a symbol of all that is valuable in literature and in human thought. The hero is admittedly not much like Aeneas – he does nothing but sleep and dream, and there is no Dido, no Turnus, to deflect him from his destiny. But just as Aeneas carried the seat of empire, and his gods, from Troy in the east to Italy in the west, so is Pope's 'hero' whisked away from the habitat of the scribblers – in London terms, the East End of the city – to contaminate the seat of Government in Westminster itself:

*Books and the man I sing, the first who brings  
The Smithfield Muses to the ear of kings.*

Instead of the foundation of Rome with all her glories, the poem ends with the promise of a world in which all that Rome, and Virgil, represent has been smothered by the weight of pedantry and bad writing:

*Art after Art goes out. and all is Night.*

### **'My Country's Poet'**

So, Virgil himself has been symbolically enlisted in the defence of traditional culture against the disruptive forces of modern society – and the savage message of *The Dunciad* is that even with such auxiliaries the battle is lost. After all this, fantasy or no, it comes as a surprise to discover that at the end of his life Pope was seriously planning to write an epic poem which would make a straightforwardly optimistic use of the myth of the westward progress of the hero destined to found a glorious race.

A few weeks before his death he described it as being 'all planned already'. The hero was to be Brutus the Trojan – the legendary found of Britain, supposedly a grandson of Aeneas. We have the first seven lines; probably no more was written, though much was sketched out in prose. The lines are not in themselves especially memorable, but there are several interesting things about them – for instance that they are in blank verse, like *Paradise Lost*, and not in Pope's habitual rhyming couplets (which he had used for the whole of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*). It is also clear that Pope meant to assume the full dignity of the epic poet. With the aid of the Muse ('Daughter of Memory') he means to be the voice of his country's history and destiny. ('Brutus' was supposed to have been exiled from Italy and to have journeyed from there to establish London, sometimes known as New Troy, and Pope begins with a statement of this subject.)

*The Patient Chief: who lab'ring long, arriv'd  
On Britain's Shore and brought with fav'ring Gods  
Arts, Arms, and Honour to her Ancient Sons:  
Daughter of Memory! from elder Time  
Recall: and me, with: Britain's Glory fir'd,  
Me, far from meaner Care or meaner Song,  
Snatch to thy Holy Hill of Spotless Bay,  
My Country's Poet, to record her Fame.*

Perhaps the most surprising thing is the complete about-turn concerning the efficacy of 'the epic' since the monumental gloom of the *Dunciad* only two years before. But one word, perhaps, stands out – as often with Pope, a verb, refusing to kow-tow to the heroic idiom of Chiefs, Gods, and Ancient Sons. One might expect an epic poet to be borne, taken, or even wafted by the Muse to his Helicon – but *snatched*?

Pope's relation to epic poetry takes many shapes, all with their own kind of obliquity – from 'rapturous' reading through translation and parody to, finally, a sad, brave, fragment of seven lines. It seems in the end quite characteristic of this individual and complex relationship that he should feel the much more desperate – and undignified need to be snatched.

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